

STARS AND SWORDS

PART 1 THE BODY

“I wanna see the body,” Morgan stated, his voice flat, cold. Pure business. He stood before the morgue, a small, squat building of tarred board and decaying tile. It had stood within Eos for so long that it was half-ignored, surrounded on all sides by newer, jettied burghomes of stone and shingle, seeming to tower above it.

Through the rotten door before Morgan, no answer came. Rolling his eyes, he wrapped hard once again, his studded leather knucklers cracking sharply once again. “I said-...”

“I hoid yeh, I hoid yeh...” came a voice from within, grumbling in disgusted disapproval. Then, a eye slit slid aside within the door, revealing a single black, bloodshot orb, and a matte of tangled brown hair. The coroner gave a noisy grunt, something halfway between a laugh and a hocked wad of phlegm. “Yeh? Yeh wanna see tha’ poor girl? Yehr jus’ afta all tha’ gold cred her pa put on whatevva took her, yeh is! Scram it, *Sleemzo!*”

The coroner tried to slam the eye-slit shut once again, but found blocking its way. It had moved too fast for him to even see it. Then, Morgan reached his belt, and withdrew a small sphere disk of ruby and iron, holding it before him. The coroner stared, then grunted.

“What’s am I lookin’ at?” he asked after a few moments, beady eye glancing back at Morgan. “Yeh a slayer? It’s bin a while since-...” he started, before trailing off, peering closer. Then, a low grumble emanated from the back of his throat. “*Oh.*”

“Yep,” Morgan affirmed, fingers drumming on the door. “Intermediary. For the School.”

Another low grumble, and the man’s eye turned back to Morgan, examining. “Yeh don’t look laik one of ‘em, really. Eyes ah wrong. No sword...”

“I’m not,” Morgan replied, looking down at himself as well. The Coroner was right; he didn’t really look the part. His dark, studded leathers were cinched tight, just loose enough at the shoulder and hip to allow

him easy movement. His boots were sturdy, but plain, and though the buff coat thrown around his shoulders was handsome in a roguish sort of way, it didn't possess nearly the same "mystical" quality that the wardrobes of his cohorts did. Neither did the weaponry belted at his hip. Two dark hand crossbows, matched with a pair of stout steel cudgels. Good weapons. Deadly ones, but simple.

"Tehn how do I know yeh ain't gonna trai and take up on the bount yehself? All they uthah bloodeh vultures came by, lookin' to grope at the poor thein's body. They don't care about 'er; they care about the creds," the raggedy man spat, giving Morgan an enterprising look once again. "Well? How do I know?"

Morgan's brow rose, and he gave a slight scoff. "I heard what she looked like. You really think I'm dumb enough to wanna take whatever did *that* alone?"

The coroner thought on that, producing another long, phlegmy hum in the back of his throat. Then, he opened the door, and let Morgan through.

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Where the city around the ancient morgue had grown upwards, expanding into the most vibrant urban center on the south side of The Continent, the morgue had grown downwards. The Bleached Catacombs beneath Eos had been expanding for well over five centuries, reaching so far into the earth that the Chroniclers had only the vaguest ideas of their far reaches. Prior to the Inquisitorius' Hunt, they had once been fertile ground for Morgan's associates, a place where students could train in hunting weaker Necrophages, and those who were older could take down viable Contracts on packs of Ghouls and Rotfiends in the deeper levels. Now, the lower levels were simply locked off, patrolled by clanking lines of the city watch. Without a little supernatural assistance, the deeper levels just weren't safe.

So, the city had forgotten the Morgue. They chose to look away, ignoring it like a fowl stench. The rich, the poor, all of them. Just as they had flaunted those who had tried to protect them, they now tried to flaunt death as a whole.

But, if the girl on the slab was any indication, it would come for them all the same.

Morgan was a hard man. The things that he had seen over his lifetime had not gone down easy. But this one was one of the worst. One of the worst by far.

The girl was young. Thirteen, maybe? Perhaps a little older. Morgan could only guess based on her size. Her features... all of her... nothing could be recognized. She looked like a great, humanoid hunk of raw meat, as if she had been flayed... but she hadn't. Morgan could tell that she hadn't. There were no marks upon the inner strands of musculature, no scratches upon the deeper epithelium. No, she hadn't been flayed.

She had been turned inside out. Flesh and bone and muscle and grit twisted and bent, in a manner so exacting, so perfect, that it could not have been done with blade or claw or normal means of Arcanum or Force. He only knew one kind of creature that could do that.

“...where was she, when she was found? Do you have clothing? Possessions?”

The Coroner grunted from just behind them, hobbling over to a side table. The man was ancient, twisted. He had been the city’s only coroner since Morgan’s mother was a girl, and he displayed not the slightest hint of emotion at the young woman’s corpse besides a vague, unassuming grief of an old man seeing the young die. “Her stuffs’ ‘ere. They foun’ her on tha corner o’ tha Westwood, where tha road ends. No clothes, jus’ ... that,” he finished gruffly, pointing to a small oilskin pouch. Giving a quiet grunt of acknowledgement, Morgan picked it from the table, undid the drawstring, and reached a tentative hand inside.

He withdrew a small pinch of a fine, silvery powder. Not ash. No.

Stardust.

Like powdered glass, pulverized crystal. It was a powerful Alchemical reactant, a residue produced by dangerous melding of Arcana and the Force, a joining of supranatural energy. It was valuable. Dangerous. Only a few things could produce it; the portals of the Collective Hunt, defeated two ago; the boiled blood of a Unicorn, or the shavings of their horn; beasts that manifested the Elder power...

Morgan’s eyes narrowed, and he slowly let the stardust sift back into the pouch, closing the drawstring with careful fingers. A dark frown crossing his scarred face, Morgan cinched it to his belt, he turned back to the Coroner, blue eyes intent.

“Yeh think yeh know whats yeh lookin’ fir?” the ancient man asked, his voice quizzical.

“I think so,” Morgan stated in return. “The Contract?”

The Coroner gave him another half-blind look, sniffing. Then, he reached into a fold of his robe, and withdrew a small scroll sealed with thick, black wax. The flesh of his hand was so shriveled and worn that it looked thinner than the paper itself, nearly to the point of translucence. “Twenteh thousan’ gold cred on retrieval. Be hasteh; her fatha leaves in three days, with thah body.”

“Tell him I need more time. It’ll take me three days alone to reach my... associates,” Morgan replied in turn.

“Yeh can’t handle it alone, Slayeh?”

“No. Not this beast. For this... I’m going to need a Witcher.”

PART 2

THE WITCHER

Morgan was a slayer. A mercenary. A whoreson rat of the streets, he had risen from a childhood of snatching bread and picking pockets to slitting throats and breaking skulls as a thug, moving on to slaying monsters and tracking bounties. He wound up a slave soldier in the army of the Severian Empire. For years, he had lived like that. A ghost. A shell. Years. When he escaped, he had been no better. For all intents, his life was over...

Emere brought him out of that. Emere brought him to the Witchers.

Witchers. Hexers. Djedi and Zith. To most of those on the continent they were repulsive. Beasts born of Alchemy and the trickery of the Force. Misanthropes, scoundrels, criminals, assassins, killers of kings, no better than the monsters that they slew for petty creds. Driven nearly to extinction by centuries of brutal pogroms, they were now a rarity, to be used, discarded, and feared. Morgan knew a little better.

He knew that the Witchers had saved the world. Alongside the army of the Severian Empire, a Brotherhood of Witchers had risen against the Collective Hunt's search for Elder Blood, annihilating the Wraiths of Oligarch and sending them screaming back into their realm. He knew that they took some of their work out of genuine good will. Most... was for creds, or to appease the Sorcerers and Force-benders that helped to lend power to their order. He knew that most Witchers were indeed scoundrels, capricious beings of greed and desire, just like their normal counterparts. He knew they were dangerous.

And he knew that his daughter was to be one of them.

Morra. Just thirteen years old. So much like that dead girl, that piece of inverted meat sitting on a cold slab of stone in Eos...

Morgan halted just outside of the School's gate. School, of course, was an objective term. Arc'Ona'Anaite'Ohana, or more simply, Arcona, was the dominant school on the southern portion of the Continent. Technically, the Severian Emperor had only allowed them to officially reactivate the school in a proclamation just after their victory over the Hunt. In reality, Older Witchers and Sorcerers had secretly been training small groups of students here for a century, after the Pravite Pogrom a hundred and forty years before had wiped the Continent clean of the Schools. Those trained here had been allowed to exist because they were useful to the Empire, as slayers, and as bodyguards, when the need arose. But, now that their use had been proven, Witchers were accepted once again... for a time.

Out of the eight schools, the eight "Clans", Arcona was the strongest. Training Witchers in the School of the Cythraul, Felinx, and Gundark, it had proffered the most students in the Battle of Bald Mountain. Two years hadn't been enough to train new students since then; the school was still in its first class. Therefore,

most of the Witchers here were veterans, hardened warriors and monster slayers with hearts of steel and eyes of burnished gold. Most. Most
Most.

“You’re telling me that she’s the *only one available*?” Morgan asked incredulously, running a hand through his deep black hair. Lucine, Countess of Vasano just rolled her eyes in response. Everything about her was... too perfect. Her hair a bright, lustrous red, her skin perfectly fair, unblemished, her teeth straight and clean as crystal. The mark of a Sorceress.

“Yes, Desatado. You know the schedule. Atyriu is out on her missionary work in the city, Tali, Karran, Aru, and most of the others are on Contract, and most of those that are not are helping Ruka and Mistress Tir’Veira train the new students, *your daughter* included. You really are quite lucky, honestly; she just got in from-...”

“Heya Luci!” called a bright, unbearably cheery voice from behind them. Both Morgan and Lucine visibly winced.

“Can I take a sleeping draft out of my stipend?” Morgan joked, blue eyes sparkling.

“Personal expense, dear,” Lucine chided, eyes sliding to the woman striding in behind Morgan. Sighing, the old mercenary turned around as well, taking in the Witcher before him.

Sera Kaern’s bright, toothy grin was nearly blinding to behold. A Zabrak, hailing from the scorched desert to the southeast from the Continent, she packed the horns and full-body tattooing characteristic of her people, though she was quite a bit fairer than the norm. Even still, she packed the warrior’s disposition of her race. Short, with a toned, tight musculature, she stood light on her feet, as if she was always ready to pounce... and she was. One of the youngest Witchers in the School, she had finished training in the School of the Cythraul just before the Battle of Bald Mountain, distinguishing herself in the fighting.

She was also the Witcher that Morgan wanted to be paired with the least. He could handle cynicism He could handle scoundrels. He *was* a scoundrel. But... Sera? Sera was bright, optimistic, with a blinding faith in everyone and everything. The temperament contrasted sharply with just how... lethal she was. As a Witcher, and as a warrior born and raised. It was disconcerting.

But, at least he could be sure she wouldn’t leave him behind if they got into a pinch.

“So...what’s the contract?” the young Zabrak questioned, golden, slit-pupiled eyes glowing with warmth as she stepped up to the table.

“Twenty thousand,” Morgan supplied. “For a... hard target.”

“Sounds like a fine hunt,” Sera replied, standing at attention. Lucine gave her a warm smile. The Zabrak adored the Sorceress, the official Consul of their school... not that the same wasn’t true for most in the school.

“It won’t be,” Morgan promised. “I’ll promise you that. Tracking down a Starweird... well. It’ll certainly earn us a few drinks on the house.”

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